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NORTHERN'S FUEL CERTIFICATION LAB DRAWS NATIONAL ATTENTION

By Tim Leeds

Montana's governor said Thursday that the opening of a new fuel testing and certification laboratory at Montana State University-Northern shows Montana's — and north-central Montana's position on renewable energy. "It sends a signal," Gov. Brian Schweitzer said to a crowd of more than 100 people. "It sends a signal to the rest of the state, it sends a signal to the rest of the country and the rest of the world. We will grow, produce and consume our own fuel domestically."

Schweitzer was one of several speakers at an open house for the new ASTM Certification Lab and the Kiewit Oil Lab at Northern, labs which can test organic fuel and lubricants and certify that they meet the standards set by ASTM International, formerly known as the American Society for Testing and Materials.

Northern's lab allows a 16-step process to test the quality of fuels and lubricants. It includes equipment donated by companies including Kiewit, one of the largest construction companies in the nation, and purchased with a special appropriation made by the state Legislature.

Montana Department of Commerce Director Tony Preite said the lab will play a major role in the national effort to reduce dependence on foreign oil. It also will help revitalize rural Montana, he said. "This is one of the public-private partnerships that will continue to move Montana forward," Preite said, adding, "I am so proud to be a Northern graduate."

Cascade County Commissioner Peggy Beltrone, the keynote speaker at the open house, made an announcement showing the attention the lab is getting: the steering committee for the 25x'25 group, which is pushing for renewable energy to provide at least 25 percent of the United States' total energy use by 2025, will meet in Montana this summer to tour the facility and other renewable energy sites in the area.

She said Northern is a leader in one of 25x25's key goals: to research and develop use of alternative energy. "Montana State University-Northern is certainly on the cutting edge, using its faculty and facilities in helping the nation through this very difficult problem," she said. The lab will help the group, which started with agricultural and forestry leaders working to find ways to increase alternative energy, in its goal, she said.

The 25x'25 goal has been endorsed by numerous states including Montana, and by the U. S. Congress and was included as a goal in the energy bill signed by President Bush in December. Northern Interim Chancellor Rolph Groseth said the labs will have a major impact in alternative energy and for north-central Montana. "This is a wonderful day for

Northern and a wonderful day for Havre and the Hi-Line," he said. "… This is a birth of an industry in our region."

Tom Livers, deputy director of the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, said the DEQ has been working to increase the use of alternative fuels since the 1980s, including introducing the use of biodiesel in tour buses in Yellowstone National Park in the 1990s. "The emissions smelled like french fries and there was some concern about bears, but we worked through that," he added. Northern's lab will be instrumental in increasing the use of alternative fuels, Livers said. "This is a huge, huge step in the long, long process of developing biodiesel in Montana," he said.

Schweitzer, a nationally recognized advocate for developing alternative energy, said the lab will help Montana return to something it had 100 years ago: people making their own fuel for their own use. All over the state, he said, people are making biodiesel to use in their vehicles, much like when his grandparents homesteaded in the Box Elder area and near Goldstone north of Rudyard. "They couldn't plant all 320 acres to wheat in 1908, they had to plant some horsepower," he said.

Schweitzer said after the open house that Northern's lab will help people produce their own fuel, much like the early farmers raised their own feed for their horses which helped plant, harvest and transport the crops. But, he said, there has to be a way to make sure the fuel meets proper standards before a farmer puts it into a $300,000 tractor.

Montanans don't have six months to wait for the results of a test, and Northern's lab will be able to speed up that process. People will be able to send the samples to Northern, have it tested and the results will be available almost instantly on a Web site the University is now developing, "and in the engine it goes," Schweitzer said. Northern's labs are already in use, including doing work for Peaks & Prairies LLC in Malta, which produces lubricants from oilseed crops, and Earl Fisher Biofuels, which is developing a biofuels plant in Chester — another one of the sites the 25x'25 steering committee plans to tour while in Montana.

Northern's College of Technical Sciences dean Greg Kegel said the lab's staff is set to do more than test for standards. Companies make additives intended to improve qualities of the fuel, he said. "And they send (the additives) to us to test them to see if they do," Kegel added.

One of the 16 steps in testing the fuels and lubricants includes using a piece of machinery donated by the Kiewit construction company, which does work throughout North America based out of Omaha, Neb. Kiewit's donation included a machine worth nearly half a million dollars to test for engine wear, detecting the amount of metal particles in lubricants. "When Kiewit called and said, 'We have about a million dollars, would you like it?' we said, 'Yes,'" Kegel said when introducing Kiewit Senior Vice President Lyle Nichols. Nichols said Kiewit, which heavily recruits Northern graduates, didn't expect the use its donation would be put to. The company did not realize the machinery would be on the cutting edge of alternative fuel development, he said. "We didn't understand, maybe, Greg's vision," Nichols said. "…We're awfully pleased to be part of this."